

The Airborne Division in 2010

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For almost six decades US Army airborne forces have been key to worldwide US military operations. Usually manned at full strength, well equipped and well trained, flexible and adaptive airborne units have remained in demand even during times of downsizing and reduced funding.

Because of their unique capabilities, airborne troops will remain the centerpiece of the Army's rapid reaction, strategic-intervention capability. Nevertheless, advanced technologies and new organizational concepts suggest that the airborne division must evolve to meet the challenges of 2010.

Historical Overview

Based on Russian prewar experiences and spurred by German successes with parachute operations early in World War II, the US Army established a parachute training center to develop doctrine, equipment and techniques for airborne warfare.¹ Early parachute operations suffered from problems inherent in all new forms of warfare. Troop-carrier pilots often failed to insert paratroopers near desired drop zones, and assembly techniques needed constant improvement. The challenges of landing artillery and other heavy equipment by glider were daunting.

Still, after small-scale drops in North Africa and regiment-size operations in Sicily and Italy in 1943, the Army mounted corps-size airborne operations. Two full US divisions and a British airborne division dropped into Normandy on the night of 5-6 June. In August, there was a second major drop in Southern France followed by a larger drop in October. These drops led the newly formed First Allied Airborne Army to the assault on Arnhem in Operation *Market Garden*.² The final major air-

borne operation in Europe, Operation *Varsity* in March 1945, demonstrated that Allied airborne forces had overcome many early problems. In the Pacific, smaller drops supported operations in the Philippines, taking Corregidor by vertical envelopment and freeing Allied prisoners of war.

Postwar analysis of parachute operations revealed distinctive characteristics. Airborne soldiers were tenacious defenders and aggressive attackers. They were highly cohesive, ferociously trained and conscious of their elite status.³ Although early US and British airborne operations suffered from many operational problems, by war's end the US Army fielded powerful, combined arms parachute and glider units that could deploy over great distances for forced entry or as conventional ground units.⁴

Improved navigational aids and aircraft designs solved many problems. Larger aircraft and advanced cargo parachutes led to deactivation of inefficient glider units. Heavier artillery, light armor, antitank (AT) weapons and, eventually, attack helicopters increased the airborne division's punch. Airborne forces remained focused on developing physically tough, aggressive soldiers as the primary source of combat power.

During the Cold War, airborne units were on continuous alert. They could move rapidly to flash points and fight on arrival, which was a valued instrument of statecraft in a tense, volatile world. In Korea, Lebanon, the Dominican Republic, Vietnam, Grenada, Panama and Operation *Desert Storm*, airborne forces have been prominent as high-quality, rapid-reaction combat units. Airborne units have proven their worth in post-Cold War contingency operations, rapidly deploying by air

and conducting initial-entry and security operations in Rwanda, Bosnia, Operation *Provide Comfort* in northern Iraq and the noncombatant evacuation operations in Liberia.

Historically, organizational and doctrinal tension has always affected the airborne division. The requirement to stay light to permit rapid deployment by air clashed with the need to increase the division's firepower and mobility to make it more useful across the spectrum of conflict. Doctrinally, there was a debate about whether the airborne should be a specialized force used only for parachute assaults then withdrawn or used as a conventional force except for having a forced-entry capability.

Early concepts gave way to the view that the airborne division must balance strategic deployability with the need to conduct sustained, high-intensity combat operations. As the Army's principal early-entry force, the division must remain light enough to move quickly anywhere in the world, yet powerful enough to take its place in conventional operations against heavy and light forces worldwide.

Considerably heavier than true light divisions such as the 25th and 10th Mountain Divisions, the airborne division is really a middle-weight division with better tactical mobility and more firepower than its light counterparts. And, it is more strategically deployable than heavy divisions. The US Army currently fields one active airborne division and battalion-size task forces in Italy and Alaska.⁵ Brigade-size airborne task forces can deploy anywhere in the world in two or three days, far faster than can amphibious forces.

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The airborne division in 2010 will employ high-tech, information-based

systems as part of a larger joint force. In general, US forces will possess systems and capabilities that provide a decisive technological overmatch against most adversaries. But, they will fight outnumbered on the ground at great distances from the Continental United States on unfamiliar terrain.

In its forced-entry role, the airborne division can seize and defend airfields, establish lodgments and introduce an early US ground presence into threatened areas—capabilities that will continue to define its usefulness as a strategic asset. Because substantial forces must be held back for a possible second major theater war, only limited forces will be available. Pressures will be strong to win quickly, limit casualties and free forces for other contingencies.

These trends suggest that the airborne division must retain its focus on strategic mobility while substantially improving its tactical mobility and combat power. Without increasing personnel strength, the division must cover more ground more quickly, speed up its decision/action cycle and hit harder with a longer reach, particularly against armored opponents. Although by definition they are less effective against tanks than a heavy division, especially in open terrain, future airborne forces must be able to support fast-moving mechanized forces in the attack and defend against armor on any terrain.

Like other US ground forces, the future airborne division will almost certainly fight at a numerical disadvantage, often against armored opponents equipped with weapons of mass destruction. In future combat environments, the United States must maintain a strong lead in technology, air power and naval warfare and integrate joint forces into a single warfighting team. With limited forces available, the Army as part of the joint team must conduct rapid operations to gain a quick decision.

Sustained battles of attrition waged on linear fronts with a continuous line of contact will give way

to battles of penetration and encirclement that carry the fight to the enemy's rear areas. Such warfare calls for divisions that can plan, move and fight rapidly to apply the knockout punch. Information technology and weapon systems to make this possible are already available. However, to realize their full potential, Army divisional structure, particularly in the airborne division, must evolve.

Organizational restructuring also will be crucial to meeting future battlefield demands. The best place to start is with division headquarters, typically a large, overstaffed organ not well suited to fast-paced crisis decisionmaking. Now at 230 personnel, the division battle staff could safely be reduced by half.⁶ Advanced automation systems and leaner staffs can support faster, crisper battle command only if Army culture changes to emphasize leading, not staffing.

In 2010, information dominance will give the Army an edge, but if Army forces cannot exploit fleeting opportunities by acting decisively in space and time, then information dominance will be a chimera. Large, cumbersome staffs have never been conducive to mastering time—the all-important combat variable.

On a more fluid battlefield characterized by fewer US combat units, maneuver brigades must be able to fight semi-independently, controlling their own direct support (DS) units as integral parts of the formation. This capability will also pay dividends in noncombat missions. Although the division, as an echelon of command, will remain essential to the Army's ability to conduct land campaigns and operations, the ability to task organize into self-contained brigade combat teams (BCTs) will pay rich dividends in stressful operational environments.

Under this concept, DS artillery, engineer and forward support battalions will remain organic to their parent organizations but will be permanently *assigned* to maneuver brigades.⁷ As now, the three maneuver battalions should continue to carry the same regimental designa-

tion to foster *esprit*, cohesion and morale. An air defense (AD) battery armed with Avengers and a brigade scout company of 100 soldiers, including 18 sniper teams in its three scout platoons plus an unmanned aerial vehicle platoon, outfitted with long-range radios would complete the airborne brigade combat team (ABCT).⁸

With three battalions added to it, the ABCT is an appropriate command for a brigadier general assisted by a colonel as regimental commander of the three numbered maneuver battalions.⁹ Regimental identity, a crucial component of combat power, ties soldiers to soldiers and soldiers to units; fosters morale and *esprit* by linking unit members to regimental traditions; and promotes vertical and horizontal cohesion.

The BCT commander, a team builder, brings together all brigade elements on the battlefield and orchestrates systems to resource the fight and weight the main effort. His fight is the close fight and the division main effort using division and corps assets.

At the maneuver battalion level, fire-and-forget antiarmor systems will vastly increase AT capabilities of airborne infantrymen. The antiarmor company in each battalion will employ line-of-sight antitank (LOSAT) systems mounted on armored high-mobility, multipurpose, wheeled vehicles (HMMWVs) while retaining its heavy weapons for use against other threats.¹⁰

The fire-and-forget Javelin has already replaced the obsolete Dragon as a medium AT weapon. The MG240 has replaced the venerable M60 medium machine gun. Increasing the number of sniper teams in the scout platoon from three to six and introducing two sniper teams into the weapons squad of the rifle platoon will help battalions engage high-value point targets at extended ranges—a capability now limited.¹¹ The new M120 heavy mortar should replace the mortar platoon's current 81-millimeter (mm) mortars.¹² These changes will increase the rifle battalion's end strength by 50 soldiers while greatly increasing firepower

and flexibility across a broad range of missions.

The Aviation Brigade

Emerging technologies are so promising that air platforms will become even more important. Combining traditional reconnaissance and security roles with attack aviation's speed and shock will give the aviation component commanding general (CG) a sledgehammer with which to attack enemy formations. Functionally, this organization more closely resembles a cavalry regiment than the traditional aviation brigade.

An ideal organization for an airborne cavalry regiment would have an RH66-equipped, air cavalry/light attack squadron; a dual-capable assault squadron fielding armed UH60L Blackhawks; a ground cavalry squadron; and a light armor battalion.¹³ Expanding division cavalry into battalion-size ground and air components will give the division powerful, overlapping reconnaissance and security capabilities better suited for information-based operations.

Commanded by either an aviation or armor brigadier general, the cavalry regiment will greatly enhance the division's situational awareness and give the division commander a potent combat formation of unequalled shock and striking power.¹⁴ With most combat service support (CSS) centralized in a large support squadron, the cavalry regiment can control attached maneuver battalions and function as a third maneuver headquarters if the tactical situation dictates.¹⁵

Although Army leaders canceled the armored gun system (AGS), the airborne division and the Army's nonmechanized divisions sorely need an air-transportable, light-armored vehicle fitted with a tank-killing main gun. While poorly suited for tank-on-tank duels, the AGS can be effective as part of an integrated, combined arms antiarmor defense. In the offense, the AGS-equipped, light-armor battalion can be used in mass or task organized to the ABCTs to defeat light armor and deliver mobile, protected heavy fires.

Should funding to revive the AGS not materialize, similar systems mounting wheeled and tracked 105-mm main guns are ready to go into production. The gun system would also be fielded with the ground cavalry squadron's scout troops.¹⁶ An added bonus would be the presence of armor leaders in the airborne division. Their expertise would enhance the division's performance in heavy/light and light/heavy operations, giving airborne brigades a combined arms flavor that was lost when the M551 Sheridan was removed from service.

Light armor would add punch to the airborne division, but division artillery (DIVARTY) is overdue for re-vamping. For many years, the Army's nonmechanized divisions have suffered from an undergunned DIVARTY. Because the towed 155-mm howitzer was too large and heavy for rapid air movement, light forces made do with the 105-mm gun. Although it was an excellent system, it lacked in range and weapons effects. However, exciting new developments make it possible to give the airborne DIVARTY much greater range and striking power without unduly sacrificing strategic mobility.

New variants of the towed 155-mm howitzer weigh half of what the current M198 does and have smaller crews and greater range. The light 155-mm howitzer can be slung under a single UH60. Like the 105-mm gun, two light 155-mm howitzers can fit into a single C130. The system can be airdropped, airlanded or delivered by the low-altitude, parachute extraction system. Improved munitions, a global positioning system (GPS) and other technologies that can locate enemy positions precisely will dramatically improve new gun systems' accuracy and lethality.

Another high-payoff innovation is the division's powerful, long-range general support (GS) artillery unit, which provides reach and striking power. The unit can attack enemy follow-on echelons and hit high-value targets in his rear. The High-Mobility Artillery System (HIMARS), a wheeled version of the modernized Guided Multiple Launch Rocket

System (GMLRS), offers a promising answer to this challenge. HIMARS fires the complete family of advanced multiple-launch rocket system munitions and can be transported by a C130. An 18-launcher HIMARS battalion of 300 soldiers will give the division the range and punch to fight high-intensity battles and engagements. And, it is significantly easier to move by air than its tracked counterpart.

Today, the airborne division has a single engineer battalion, many of whose tasks are nonstandard, such as airfield clearance, rapid runway repair and engineer raids. To strengthen the division's combat power in high-intensity operations and improve its ability to employ reinforcing corps engineer units, a small combat engineer brigade should be formed.

Each airborne battle coordination team would be supported by a strong DS engineer company, consisting of three sapper platoons, an assault/obstacle platoon with light engineer vehicles, an engineer maintenance platoon and a headquarters platoon. A brigade engineer leading a small engineer section would provide oversight, planning and coordination functions. At the division level, a GS engineer battalion, having three combat engineer companies and a bridge company, would provide road and airfield repair assets and a better capability to move, harden critical nodes and breach complex obstacle belts.

With DS units chopped away, what is left for division support, artillery and engineer commanders? They would not be irrelevant; they would play crucial roles. The DIVARTY commander would employ a powerful GMLRS battalion in general support of the division, overseeing several battalions of reinforcing corps artillery. The division engineer brigade commander would control a division GS engineer battalion and in most cases reinforcing corps engineer units. The combat support brigade would administratively control the division's main support; intelligence, signal and personnel service battalions; and military police and chemical companies. Each brigade

commander would double as the commanding general's principal planner and subject matter expert, providing oversight and assistance to associated intermediate DS units.

To improve tactical mobility, transportation assets in support battalions would allow brigades to move three rifle companies in one lift, with division transportation assets moving another three.¹⁷ These improvements, plus the 36 lift aircraft in the assault squadron, would help the airborne division more quickly reposition, refuel and rearm maneuver units on the battlefield.

A proposal to remove all CSS from maneuver battalions has been broached.¹⁸ The decision to concentrate all CSS at echelons above the battalion—employing new technologies to effect just-in-time battlefield support—offers advantages more apparent than real. The place for super efficiencies is in garrison and the depot because lives and battles would not be on the line. Tactical commanders, at least in a basic way, must be allowed to *command*, not just request, the minimal CSS needed to fight and survive. In keeping with this principle, the airborne division of 2010 should not disturb CSS assets' functional distribution in ground maneuver battalions.¹⁹

These organizational and weapon system improvements will greatly change how the airborne division fights on the ground, but its ability to conduct airborne operations also must improve. In the last 50 years, only marginal changes have been made to basic techniques. Most changes have been aviation-related, such as night flying, navigation, formation flying, long-range communications and adverse-weather delivery systems. The C17 has dramatically improved strategic airlift, giving joint commanders a better capability to move outsized cargo over great distances for paratroop or assault landing into denied areas. But, paratroopers must still drop from 500 to 800-foot altitude at slow speeds, and once on the ground, they need up to an hour or more to assemble, recover supplies and equipment and move toward objectives.

Fresh thinking about airborne

techniques and technologies might lead to parachute delivery systems that permit faster drop speeds at lower altitudes. One concept envisions using a pilot chute/drogue chute/main parachute system that would allow personnel drops from 300 feet at 300 knots. New technology might also permit faster assembly, using voice-activated communications systems and inexpensive individual direction prompters. GPS-guided cargo parachutes would also improve heavy-equipment drop accuracy and reliability, contributing to faster assembly and buildup of combat power inside the airhead.

Although the military used airborne forces with great effect in the airborne assault mode in Grenada and Panama, critics question parachute-operations feasibility in higher-intensity scenarios. Unquestionably, parachute assaults require detailed planning and resourcing, but they are no more complex or risky than air assault operations of similar size. Given the US military's absolute air superiority and assuming that basic doctrine considerations are observed, such as suppression of enemy air defenses and adequate preassault fires, mass tactical airborne operations will be as viable in this century as in the last.

Operational Effectiveness

Airborne assaults can be operationally effective when employed as part of a campaign plan that recognizes their unique strengths and weaknesses. Unlike air assault operations, airborne operations can be mounted over greater distances at greater closure speeds, enhancing surprise and shock. Combat power buildup can be significantly more rapid. In one hour a brigade-size combined arms task force with all supporting artillery, AT vehicles and three days of supplies can be dropped, assembled and committed to action at night in zero visibility. With appropriate close air support (CAS), corps artillery rocket fires and airdrop resupply, the force can establish strong blocking positions behind the enemy or seize river crossings, defiles or other high-value choke points to support the ad-

vance of mechanized or other conventional forces. A major parachute operation normally requires most of the tactical airlift available in a theater of operations, although only for a limited time.

A crucial point of doctrine is that airborne operations must never be considered an end in themselves; they must always support larger campaign objectives. In high-intensity battles against heavy forces, combined arms airborne assaults should be mounted in strength on favorable terrain and be supported by CAS and long-range artillery fires.

To achieve decisive results, airborne operations should be mounted at operational depths to achieve operational-level objectives, culminating in a linkup with reinforcing ground forces. Typically, such operations would involve initial seizure of key terrain by parachute assault followed by an assault landing or heavy-drop echelon to bring in more artillery, light armor, fuel and ammunition.

Long-range division assets such as HIMARS and Comanche helicopters, augmented by corps fires, would support the assault from airfields and stand-off firing positions. On suitable terrain and properly supported with tactical air, future airborne forces could repel counterattacks by heavy forces until relieved, giving the joint force commander a deep-attack option for disrupting and dislocating the enemy well beyond the main battle area. By streamlining, modernizing and reengineering, the airborne division would be able to incorporate new technology and organizational concepts to become more agile and lethal.

While the new division would be heavier, the ability to deploy brigade combat teams as currently configured would remain unchanged. If necessary, heavier elements such as the HIMARS or light armor battalions could be flown in later or moved by fast sealift. Stronger, faster, more flexible but still strategically deployable, the future airborne division must be an instrument of rapid, decisive combat. While retaining many structural virtues and strengths, the divi-

sion must evolve with the changing battlefield. Equipped with leading-edge technology and manned by tough, well-trained, aggressive soldiers, the division will remain ready and viable far into the 21st century.

NOTES

1. The Red Army pioneered airborne-warfare techniques, entering World War II with corps-size airborne formations. German *fallschirmjaeger* parachute units scored notable success while advancing across Belgium, storming Fort Eben Emael and taking Crete. To train, equip and develop doctrine for airborne forces, the US Provisional Parachute Group was formed in 1941, followed in 1942 by Airborne Command.

2. The First Allied Airborne Army consisted of the US 82d and the 101st Airborne Divisions; Britain's 1st Airborne Division; Poland's Parachute Brigade; and supporting troop-carrier units and corps-level support formations. All were deliverable by parachute or glider.

3. The 2d Battalion, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, set a world record in 1943 when it marched 118 miles in three days. See Stephen E. Ambrose, *Band of Brothers* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 26.

4. The 101st Airborne's performance at Bastogne and the 82d Airborne's actions at St. Vith during the Ardennes counteroffensive in December 1944 and January 1945 demonstrated conclusively that when fighting in restrictive terrain, airborne units could defend successfully against Germany's best armored units. Equipped with large numbers of captured German *panzerfaust* and *panzerschreck* handheld AT weapons, airborne units conducted a tenacious, persistent defense. Information provided to the author in 1980 by LTG James Gavin, US Army, Retired, former commander, 82d Airborne Division.

5. The 1/508th is in Italy; the 1/501st is in Alaska. Other airborne units include the 1/507th, the airborne training battalion at the Infantry Center; the 1/509th, the opposing force battalion at the Joint Readiness Training Center; and various corps-level support units in the 18th Airborne Corps. Although more lightly equipped than conventional airborne formations, most special operations forces are parachute trained and capable of forced entry.

6. A division battle staff of 115 is certainly feasible if training management, garrison support and other non-combat functions are outsourced, privatized or transferred to other post activities.

7. This concept envisions the brigade commander in actual command of these units unless they are placed un-

der another brigade's operational control for specific tactical missions. The DIVARTY, division engineer (DIVENG) and divisions support command (DISCOM) commanders retain oversight and branch-specific technical and training responsibilities for organic DS units assigned to maneuver brigades. One option is to leave them as raters of DS units, with the brigade commander as intermediate rater and the commanding general as senior rater. Another is to have the brigade commander serve as rater for his DS units while soliciting letter input from DIVARTY, DIVENG and DISCOM commanders.

8. Given current US air dominance, eliminating the short-range AD battalion is justifiable. The brigade AD battery is intended to provide point defense of high value assets such as command posts (CPs) and the brigade support area against low-level rotary-wing threats.

9. With a brigadier general commanding the maneuver brigades, there would be no need for same-rank assistant division commanders. The division chief of staff would run the division main CP; the division support commander would run the division rear CP; and the commanding general would direct the fight forward from the division tactical CP, brigade CPs or from a command and control aircraft.

10. Until LOSAT is fielded, the vulnerable tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided (TOW) missile system should be replaced by the Javelin. Although the Javelin's range is slightly less than the TOW's, its fire-and-forget, soft-launch, top-attack features make it more survivable and effective. Another crucial requirement is to increase the antiarmor crew from three to four. Because of the density of weapons assigned to the crew, its multiple missions and its inability to function after even a single casualty, this modest increase is imperative. Heavy weapons would include the Mark-19 automatic grenade launcher and the M2 .50-caliber heavy machine gun.

11. Trained snipers are important force multipliers. Their value has been neglected too long in US Army infantry units. They can be effective against targets at ranges to 1,000 meters. The number of sniper teams per battalion should be increased from 3 to 24, which would provide tremendous improvement in long-range precision fires at low manpower costs.

12. Because the 81-mm mortar platoon already has HMMWVs, its replacement by the heavier M120 would not affect its mobility or deployability. Although ammunition for the 120-mm mortar is bulkier, the disadvantage is more than offset by the weapon's greatly improved range and effects. Through the early 1980s, airborne units had 81-mm mortars at company level and the 4.2-inch heavy mortar at battalion level, without degraded ability to resupply ammunition.

13. The assault squadron should field 38 Blackhawks in three troops of 12 each, plus two for headquarters. This would give the division the ability to move one infantry bat-

talion combat echelon in one lift. The weapon mix would depend on the mission. For air assaults, the UH-60 would be armed with miniguns. For light attack missions, rockets and Hellfires would be added.

14. With 25 Comanches in the air cavalry/light attack squadron and 38 Hellfire-equipped Blackhawks in the assault squadron, it is theoretically possible for the cavalry regiment to launch about 900 fire-and-forget Hellfire missiles in less than five minutes—enough to completely shatter an enemy tank division.

15. The ground cavalry squadron and light armor battalion would retain maintenance and support platoons.

16. Ideally, the squadron would employ three troops, each with two tank platoons, two scout platoons and a three-tube 120-mm mortar section. The ground cavalry squadron scout platoons would field the UpArmored HMMWV (UAHMMWV) mounting the MK19 automatic grenade launcher and M250-caliber heavy machine gun. By 2010 the future scout vehicle would replace the UAHMMWV.

17. Currently, airborne infantry battalions' organic trucks can move one rifle company team in a single lift.

18. This has already been announced for the reorganized Army XXI heavy division.

19. Aviation units' CSS in the cavalry regiment can be safely consolidated in the regimental support squadron since all aircraft must return to rear areas to refuel, rearm, exchange crews and be serviced.

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Force Protection Implications: TF Smith and the 24th Infantry Division, Korea 1950

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"They were Task Force [TF] Smith, which [General Douglas] MacArthur termed an arrogant display of strength, sent ahead into Korea to give the Communists pause. [Major General (MG) William F.] Dean had been ordered to move his entire 24th [Infantry] Division to the peninsula, but it was scattered the length and breadth of Japan, near six separate ports, and there were no ships immediately available. It would have to go in bits and pieces, of which Task Force Smith was the first."¹

Since July 1950, TF Smith and the

24th Infantry Division (ID) have been used as examples of poor tactical combat performance. However, instead of serving as an indictment, their actions should be reminders of the results of operational, national and strategic failure.

Poor operational and strategic intelligence; poor operational planning; and a lack of operational mobility and transportation were as much to blame for initial US failures in Korea as any problems tactical units might have had. The finger should have been wagged at senior

leaders all the way up to the National Command Authority.

In retrospect, TF Smith performed reasonably well, considering what it faced. Survivors of TF Smith have related, and analyses indicate, that even a larger, better-prepared force would have still failed, given the 4th North Korean People's Army (NKPA) Division's strength.²

Despite the tremendous setbacks in July and August 1950, TF Smith and the 24th ID played key roles in slowing North Korean forces in the drive to Pusan. The North Koreans